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Language Arts, 6

A Doctor’s Oath

For most of my life, I have had the ambition of becoming a doctor. Each of my four grandparents exhausted hours of life studying and massaging their temples to obtain their doctorates, each one of them having saved a limitless of amount of lives throughout their careers. I remember listening wide-eyed to their stories of miracles short of only the divine, and I would daydream of a day when I would recite the famous Hippocratic Oath, of when I would take off a doctor’s mask, sweating and exhausted after twelve hours of surgery just to let them know they were going to be fine. My grandmother, an ocular surgeon for over forty years at her home in China, has always been a symbol of inspiration for me. But as I would learn from her, the person whose influence had shaped her own life and the first member of my family to ceremonially pledge to save lives was actually her father. After a single interview with her about this man I now honor, I have learned the adventure saga that was his life, full of difficulties from the very beginning, the fulfilling of his dreams later on, and even a survival in the frontline of troubled times, all to continue to live on in the lessons he had taught my grandmother, and she in turn had taught to me.

Whereas I was given a family that loved me, an environment that nurtured me, and a country that would provide every opportunity I needed in order to become successful, my great-grandfather's early life was nowhere near as fruitful. Born to peasants in the northern Chinese province of Manchuria, he lived his childhood in a troubled time during the 1910's, right in the midst of a government revolution that would decide the future of his country. Nearly 400 years before, my great-grandfather's family led a glorified life, famous for seven brothers who shared royal blood and had saved the Emperor's life during the establishment of the Qing Dynasty. But the centuries past had left the once honorific clan in shambles after constant plundering and misuse of money, leaving their descendants by the time of my great-grandfather's birth to scrabble on by farming poor land. My grandmother would sigh when she described her father's childhood, her gentle and serene voice laced with sympathy as she responded, "My father, your great-grandfather, was always the odd one out, never being able to get that running start that every child should need. He lost both his parents when he was young, and I'll never understand how he was able to push through, and it was truly a miracle that he did." As my grandmother had explained, on top of near poverty and a country in crisis, my great-grandfather had the bear the burden of lost parents at a very young age. He had never met his mother, a young woman who had traveled from her homeland of Japan to fall in love with his father. After marrying and having their first and only child, my great-grandfather's mother was sentenced to exile back to Japan because of rising political tensions between their countries, never to meet her son-to-be ever again. Left alone with his father, my great-grandfather was taught from an early age that education was the only way he could escape from the fate that was written out for him at birth. Ignoring the fact that the universe itself seemed to be aspiring against him, he dedicated himself to studying and learning anything and everything he was exposed to.

After eighteen years of grueling tests in both school and life, my great-grandfather was exposed to a stroke of luck that would allow him the rare opportunity to pursue his life's dream. "He was given the chance, for the first time, to accomplish something important," my grandmother's voice had expressed with a tinge of pride. "And with nothing to lose, he took the trip all the way to Britain to study his one true dream: medicine." The moment he was able to, my great-grandfather left his stagnant lifestyle and traveled to Beijing to attend a university, using the carefully safeguarded inheritance from his deceased father to pay for the tuition. This was a major feat in itself, as no one in his position had been able to achieve higher education before. During his studies, he caught the eye of an England missionary with his steadfast effort and dedication. A doctor and philanthropist, he recognized the potential of the bedraggled and sleepless panda-eyed young man like no one but his own father and done before. On his return journey back home, he brought my great-grandfather back to Britain, where he was enrolled into the top medical school of London on recommendation by his new friend and mentor. Five years later, my great-grandfather returned to China with his head held high, having graduated from school with top honors and able to intrigue the people with strange words in the foreign tongue he had learned. He found a job as a doctor, settling down with his new wife in a quiet city and undisturbed by the rumors of upcoming war and conflict. Out of the many lives he saved in his work, one of the most important was that of his second daughter, my grandmother, who had been infected with nearly always fatal infant influenza. Using his connections with English doctors, he procured the latest medicine and treatments to cure her disease, eventually succeeding after three days of uncertainty and praying. With more money than he had ever fathomed to own and limited only by the horizon and heavens, my great-grandfather, son of peasants and farmers, was able to open his own hospital, dedicated to helping the poor and unfortunate he had nothing but empathy for.

Behind my great-grandfather's guise of maturity, shrewdness, and empathy, he lead what could be called a double life, secretly performing acts of decency throughout his life as long as it was for something he believed in. As overused as this statement is with today's Batman stereotypes, my great-grandfather was a true hero, risking his life constantly for the greater good. Manchuria, the place where he lived in his youth and had found a home as an adult, was officially conquered by the Empire of Japan until to the end of the Second World War. Despite open neutrality to military conflict, my great-grandfather held a massive resentment towards the Japanese, as did most of the world during that time period. Having lived through the horror of it herself, my grandmother narrates her experiences in a tone of anger I had never known she harbored, "We didn't live in the forefront of the war where battles were fought between the national armies. The soldiers had come to the land long ago and gave no sign of leaving. They demanded that all rice grown in the fields be given to them, so the rest of us had nothing to eat but gruel. I was only a child at the time, and I was scared. But my father wasn't. He had always listened to rules and laws, but despised it when something was unfair or could not be justified, so he created his own rebel force to bring justice back to our home." According to my grandmother, her father had led the largest rebel force in Manchuria, raiding Japanese weapon storages, tainting their food supply, and doing whatever they could for their country. There were other stories, of course, of him escorting a group of rebels into Korea, also conquered by the Japanese, and saving the life of a young girl from a burning building set ablaze for entertainment by the soldiers. He had performed CPR on her nonstop until she had revived and moved to a nearby hospital. Once the war was over and the Japanese withdrew from China, my great-grandfather disbanded his group of revolutionaries and returned to saving more lives at his hospital. However, the finale of World War II was also the revival of the Chinese Civil War, eventually ending in the establishment of a communist government. Wanting nothing to do with the internal quarrels of his nation, he had abided with the rules set down by the new government, including having to abandon the wealth he had accumulated as a doctor and the right to own a private hospital. Instead, he was assigned to a position at a state-sanctioned facility, preferring to live the rest of his life saving lives, no matter where or how he did it.

Without a doubt, my great-grandfather’s journey of life has made a profound impact on both me and my grandmother. The next year marks the five year anniversary of his passing, the end of an ninety-four year old saga straight from the books of legend. However, the end of his life did not mean the end of his story, but only a single chapter, as I will continue to keep him alive by following his in his stead. I have been inspired by my grandmother’s tales of him, and I have made an oath to myself to never give up on my dreams, just like he had done all those years before. I will always have doubts that I will not be able to become a doctor, but I know I will never be alone with the memory of him guiding me on for the rest of my life.